

Lack Of Maritime Security Leaves U.S. Ports Open To Attack

Press Release

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PETERSON AFB, Colo. ? Though the United States is safer today than it was three years ago from air and land attacks by terrorists, the nation has ?a long way to go? to shield itself from seaborne attacks, said Gen. Ed Eberhart, commander of North American Aerospace Defense Command and U.S. Northern Command.

?I believe that it is just a matter of time until the terrorists try to use a seaborne attack, a maritime attack against us,? Eberhart recently told a group of journalists who visited ? for the first time ever ? some of the most secure areas in NORAD and USNORTHCOM.

Following a tour of the Cheyenne Mountain Operations Center, Combined Fusion Intelligence Center and Domestic Warning Center, the 18 journalists spent 30 minutes with Eberhart in a roundtable discussion.

Eberhart said that a maritime attack could come in any form ? from terrorists sailing into harbor with high explosives or a weapon of mass destruction to terrorists launching an unmanned aerial vehicle or cruise missile from a distance.

Such attacks are possible, he said, because the nation?s situational awareness of the sea ?is not as mature, not as sophisticated, or as elegant? as (its) awareness of air space.?

Nonetheless, the United States has come a long way ?in terms of securing our seas and ports? since Sept. 11, 2001. In fact, the average American is not even aware ?of all the things we have done? to secure maritime approaches, said Eberhart.

Security efforts he mentioned include deploying law enforcement to check cargo ships ?before they even depart the port of origin,? and the increased level of ?collaboration and cooperation? between the Joint Harbor Operations Centers in San Diego, Calif., and Norfolk, Va., which Eberhart said now serve as a ?prototype? for other port officials.

Despite security gains, the NORAD and USNORTHCOM commander cautioned against complacency. ?The minute we say, ?The status quo is good ?? we become predictable. The enemy is going to out flank us and sock us in the eye again.?

As commander of NORAD, Eberhart is ultimately responsible for protecting the nation against threats coming from inside and outside of the nation. As commander of USNORTHCOM, he is responsible for homeland defense and coordinating military assistance to civilian authorities during a presidential declared emergency or disaster situation.

Eberhart said he believes USNORTHCOM, as a combatant command, will continue to evolve and acquire more forces ?relevant for homeland defense and homeland security.?

?I think what will shape the command is the threat and what we think constitutes the threat.? One of the command?s goals, he said, ?is to stay ahead of threats? and not ?just be good at mitigating? effects from both man-made and natural disasters.

The mission of USNORTHCOM is to deter, prevent and defeat threats and, if something does happen, to mitigate the circumstances. But Americans expect and deserve

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“more than mitigation,” said Eberhart. “They deserve us to be out there protecting them by deterring, preventing and defeating (enemy forces).”

While Eberhart believes terrorists are still planning an attack on the nation that they hope will make “a big splash,” he said he also thinks the threat is even greater today against targets overseas.

“I don’t wish terrorist attacks to anyone overseas – not to our friends and neighbors or even to anyone who is not our friend or neighbor. But I do believe that because of what we have done since 9–11, you have not seen a follow up attack here but you have seen attacks elsewhere.”

In addition to improving maritime security, Eberhart told reporters that the United States must continue to protect its borders. The United States and Canada maintain a “strong relationship,” he said, but ties with Mexico are not as strong even though there is “a lot of cooperation” between the nations “in terms of drug trafficking along our borders.”

According to Eberhart, the 2001 terrorist attacks showed just how important it is for the United States, Canada and Mexico to cooperate. “My intuition tells me that someday that’s going to make sense, someday that is going to be right for all three nations.”

Eberhart said, however, the issue is not something the United States “could or wants to force on our neighbors.” But, to not consider such an agreement “and not address it would be a mistake,” he said.